# From Pullman Car Porter to Honor Guest of Drama League

## The Ladder by Which Charles Gilpin Climbed to Stage Success Had Many Devious Rounds

By Torrey Ford

"DID I have any thrills? I'll say I did I had 'em all! I had the thrill of my life, and a whole lot more thrown in on the side. They knocked me off my feet."

Thus spoke Charles S. Gilpin, one-time Pullman porter and elevator boy, now the negro star of "Emperor Jones," when asked to describe the emotions he experienced at the Drama League banquet, when nearly a thousand members of the league jumped to their feet, tossed napkins in the air and shouted themselves hoarse to make the negro feel that he was welcome at their board.

### Had a Fine Time

There was more than that to the demonstration. They wanted Gilpin to know how badly every one felt about the unforgivable blunder made by some of the members in an ill-considered attempt to draw the color line in art. They wanted to make some retribution and apparently they succeeded.

"I only intended to drop in and pay my respects," Gilpin said. "I planned to stay about four minutes and then retire gracefully. I stayed four hours and had the time of my life.

"No, it didn't take much nerve to go and face the crowd. I knew some of my friends would be there and I'd be all right with them. I could count on the artists treating me fairly, and I didn't care a hang about the others. They could sit there and stare at me as though I were some kind of a prize monkey and it wouldn't disturb me at all.

### For a Friend's Sake

"First off I thought I wouldn't go at all, even if they did ask me. Later I got to thinking that if I didn't go I would be disloyal to the ranch friends who wanted me there, who had gone to all the trouble of protesting against any discrimination against me. I had to go and show my appreciation of their kindness.

"So I planned just to drop in and say 'thank you.' I had a nice little speech all prepared, the fewest words I could think of to explain how grateful I was and how I really couldn't stay. I expected them to be polite—it isn't hard for ladies and gentlemen to be polite—but I expected nothing more.

"I hadn't gone more than two feet inside the door before I realized that it wasn't going to be any ordeal. They were treating me as though I really belonged there. They took me right down to a table and sat me down between Gilda Varesi and Mrs. Rollin Kirby. And there I stayed

"When I got up to speak every line of my 'speech' had gone shooting off to the four winds. But it wouldn't have served anyway, for in it I had apologized for not staying for the dinner, and there I was!

### Life's Greatest Moment

"All I could say was 'thank you,' and I guess I said that pretty badly; but I hope they understood how I felt. It was the greatest moment of my life."

And well it may have been. Here was a colored man, well on his way toward fifty years old, who has been knocked around from pillar to post all his life, who has played in any old fly-by-night show that came along—in vaudeville, musical comedy, barnstorming minstrels—in most of the bad and a few of the good theaters in this country and Canada. In between acting jobs he has served as a Pullman porter, hotel porter elevator man, barber—anything to make a living.

And all of a sudden, due to a curious break of circumstances, he finds himself little less than the hero of a huge banquet turned into a testimonial meeting in honor of his color and his art. A better man might have lost his head under the same pressure.

*THE deposed emperor has a vision of a past page in his life*

### Not in Hero's Pose

Gilpin took his glory modestly, unaffected and in repose. He appreciated every bit of it, but he wouldn't admit that he was in any sense a hero. He didn't want to talk with the press.

"I like to keep the footlights between me and the public," he said. "I don't go in much for sociality or hobnobbing. If I can give any one pleasure with my acting I am very happy to do so. But that's all. A close-up of Charles Gilpin does not look very inviting.

"I have my own little circle of friends and I love them. I live quietly up in Harlem where I belong. When I leave the theater I like to leave it.

"I am really a race man—a negro and proud of being one, proud of the progress the negroes have made in the time and with the opportunity they have had. And I don't want the public to think anything different."

It was only with great reluctance that Gilpin consented to tell anything about himself—where he came from and how he happened to be where he is to-day. Throughout the conversation he kept frowning over the idea that he was sailing under false colors. He didn't want any one to imagine that a little prominence in the headlines had made him lose his sense of proportion.

### Not Easy to Interview

As a matter of fact, we didn't interview him at all. We cross-examined him, pulling the facts out one by one with a pair of heavy pliers.

"I was born down in Richmond, Va. A colored man doesn't have any dates—he is just born. I went to the St. Francis Roman Catholic School, where one of the Sisters taught me a few of the fundamentals of the acting business—elocution and gesticulation. I took part in amateur theatricals there at the school.

"When I was about fourteen I started in at the printer's trade on The Richmond Planet; worked at everything from printer's devil up to a pressman. Occasionally I'd go on at Putnam's Music Hall in a song and dance skit. Just for the excitement. There wasn't any money in it.

"About 1890 I came up to Philadelphia and worked three hours as a pressman. Then they fired me on account of my color. So I sort of got tossed back on to the stage again.

### A Barber Shop Porter

"I wasn't fussy; I'd take any job that was offered. Away we'd start with a show, get paid for the first night or so, and then we'd live on 'art' for a while. Finally I got stranded down in Charlottesville after a barnstorming tour with a minstrel show, and took oath never to play again. I worked in a barber shop as a porter and learned the trade until I wasn't much worse than some of the other barbers.

"One day a wire came from the Canadian Jubilee Singers. I jumped at the chance and joined them at Hamilton, Ontario. We put in the winter of 1903-'04 touring Canada. From there I drifted out with Bert Williams and Walker in 'Abyssinia' and with Gus Hill's Smart Set in 'The Black Politician.'

### First Colored Theater

"Then I joined Robert Motts at the Pekin in Chicago, the first colored theater in the country. Mostly we did musical comedy, but there were eleven of us in the company who wanted to have a try at the serious drama. One night we took an awful chance and produced 'Captain Swift.'

"The general character of the remarks of the folks who had paid down their good money for admission was that they were there for a good laugh. They came to laugh and they remained to applaud. It was an artistic hit.

### Played in Many Parts

"After that we used to do one serious drama every two weeks. I got my chance to play varied parts. With a little grease paint and powder I could make up into any color on demand. I played everything from blackface comedy to a Chinaman. But when Motts died it was all over.

"I went back to portering again. When there was nothing else doing I always went back to portering. Lots of times I could make more money on the railroads than I could at acting. It was better than going hungry, anyway, and I had it on a lot of actors who didn't have any second trade.

### Away From Race

"In 1912 I toured Canada with a double quartet, and had one of the pleasantest trips of my career. For a few months I got away from that damned race thing—all about what I could do if I wasn't a black man.

"Then back to vaudeville and more portering.

"In 1916 I began producing last year's Broadway shows at the Lafayette Theater, in 132d Street. I guess I was the first colored man to try such a thing. The theater is still running.

### In 'Abraham Lincoln'

"When the producers were staging Drinkwater's 'Abraham Lincoln' they had some difficulty finding an actor to play William Curtis. I got a wire when I was out on the road and caught the dress rehearsal by a hair. They promised to put me on after the first two weeks. I opened with the show the next night in Stamford, Conn., and stayed with it throughout the Broadway run.

"Last fall I joined the Provincetown Players with 'The Emperor Jones.' We were going to play it for two weeks. We're still going. That's all."

Few producers would have dared tackle Eugene G. O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones." It was too radically different from anything that had ever happened before. There were eight scenes, of which all but two were straight monologue by a negro character. For relief there was only a tom-tom drum that began in the first scene and continued throughout the play. It was one of those things that couldn't be done.

Yet George Cram Cook did it down at the little theater in Macdougal Street.

### Moved Up Town

The critics came and were impressed. The small public that could crowd into the tiny house came, too, and applauded. "The Emperor Jones" was making a good bid for attention. Some one took it up to the Selwyn Theater for a few special matinees. Then it moved into the Princess for a regular run. Between O'Neill and Gilpin "The Emperor Jones" became established as an artistic and commercial success.

Essentially it was a play that the actor could make or break. It tells the story of an American negro, a Pullman porter, who landed on one of the islands in the West Indies and in two years made himself emperor. As the play opens the rebellion has started. Smithers tells him about it. It is time for Emperor Jones to "resign." He starts out alone, whistling, with all the bravado he can assume.

The rest of the play takes place in the forest at night, showing the gradual breaking down of the negro's nerve under the pressure of the dark, the tom-tom and his racial imagination.

Gilpin seemed to be made for the part. He could interpret the darky humor, the bravado and later the agony of the confused, half-crazed creature stumbling to his doom. And, besides, it must be remembered that Gilpin had been a Pullman porter. But however he achieved it, the general verdict was that Gilpin gave a performance of heroic stature.

Along came the Drama League with plans for its annual dinner on March 6 to honor the ten biggest contributors to dramatic art during the year. A vote was to be taken among the league members to determine the personnel of the favored ten. As the voting proceeded it was seen that Charles S. Gilpin was up among the leaders.

The directors of the league made a hasty and thoughtless move. They announced that even if Gilpin should be among the ten receiving the highest number of votes he would not be invited to the dinner.

A storm of protest immediately broke out from the leading actors and actresses in the profession. If the league were going to exclude Gilpin on account of his color they would stay away from the dinner, too. From Mary Garden to Ben-Ami the demand was insistent that Gilpin should be invited.

A few days later the Drama League came out with a retraction. If Gilpin were among the first ten he would be invited. Then came hints from Gilpin that perhaps he wouldn't go, anyway. But the dinner came off and Gilpin was there.

Among the ten selected were Charles S. Gilpin, selected for his work in "The Emperor Jones"; Dudley Digges, director of "Heartbreak House"; Gilda Varesi, for her work in "Enter Madame"; Lionel Atwill, for his acting in "Deburau"; Lee Simonson, scenic artist for "Heartbreak House"; Margaret Severn, for her use of masks in the "Greenwich Village Follies"; Jacob Ben-Ami, for his work in "Samson and Delilah"; David Belasco, as manager and director; Fred Stone, for being the leading American comedian, and Eugene G. O'Neill, for being the author of "The Emperor Jones."

### Great Crowd Attended

Usually there are about 250 persons who attend the annual Drama League dinner. This year close to one thousand people tried to jam their way into the grand ballroom at the Hotel McAlpin. An adjoining room had to be made ready at the last moment to accommodate part of the overflow.

When America wakes up to the spirit of fair play it doesn't do things by halves. Gilpin had his well deserved hour of triumph. And no one begrudged him a minute of it.

## Acting Proving Unprofitable, the Star of "Emperor Jones" Didn't Despise Menial Tasks

*CHARLES GILPIN as the Emperor Jones. He is here still the mighty potentate, undismayed by his impending fall*

*THE first step down from the throne when the deposed emperor finds that his food cache is empty*

# Henrietta Economizes on the Paint Bill

HENRIETTA said it could be done, but she has a woman's unjustifiable optimism as to the ability of the male of the species to do odd jobs around the house. The bookshelves were only about seven feet long, but they had stood unpainted in all their yellow nakedness for a month. It was ghastly to look at those shelves. Contrasted with the rest of the house they projected a raw, unfinished aspect into the room. Meantime the books were tumbled into a corner. They looked mussy and outlandishly second-handish, as tumbled-about books are wont to look.

Henrietta said the painter around the corner would do the job for $5 and not a cent less. He belonged to a union, or something, which prohibited him from indulging in competitive bidding. Henrietta declared that as she had an able-bodied husband she knew of no reason why she should throw away money on painters. It was no use to argue with her about the value of time or the cost of the paint. She figured it out this way:

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|---|---|
| Pint can of white paint | .70 |
| Turpentine | .20 |
| Brush | .15 |
| | $1.05 |

Total to be saved, $3.95. So far so good. Monday night was set for the job. Mr. Husband got home early, and after supper rolled up his sleeves, pulled the shelves into the middle of the room, spread a lot of newspapers under them so as not to ruin the floor and began work with a vision of saving $3.95.

After he had stirred the paint around in the little tin with a stick, had put in some turpentine to make it thinner and had slopped some of the paint over on to a spot of the floor where the newspapers failed to reach, he dipped in the brush and was about to apply the first daub when he staggered back.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "Gosh! Henrietta! Putty! Putty! I've forgotten the putty."

"What's putty for?" asked Henrietta.

"Why, to fill up the cracks and nail holes," explained Mr. Husband.

Having gone out and paid 15 cents for the putty, thereby reducing his amount saved to $3.80, Mr. Husband resumed his work. He had applied the putty and had got half way over one of the shelves when he staggered back again.

"Henrietta, my gosh!" he stammered. "Shellac! I've forgotten the shellac! It's to daub over the knots so the paint will stick."

*"THE next coat will make it darker, Henrietta"*


Back again from the paint shop with a bottle of shellac, he reduced his total saved by 20 cents, making it $3.60. He had not progressed far when he discovered he was spattering the paint over the floor and onto one of the walls. It's remarkable how paint will distribute itself. A little puddle of it had collected on that spot on the floor where the newspapers didn't reach. Also he discovered that the paint ran down the brush handle and was depositing itself beneath his finger nails and encrustating itself in his knuckles.

"How about an old pair of gloves, Henrietta?" he asked. "Might as well use those chamois. Will need a new pair, anyway."

Gloves on, he continued. Observing Henrietta's serious contemplation, he observed: "Don't worry about that paint on the floor. A little turpentine will take it off when I'm through."

The first of the three coatings was almost completed when Mr. Husband stepped back with a look of horror. "Gosh! Henrietta," he murmured. "The color doesn't match the other shelves. It's too white. I should have darkened it with a little coloring matter."

Henrietta acquiesced. The coloring matter—a tube of raw sienna in oil—reduced the amount saved to $3.25. "Now we're fixed," said Mr. Husband confidently. "The next coat we'll make it darker, a nice ivory shade. We'll leave that paint on the floor till to-morrow night."

Mr. Husband used up the remainder of the turpentine to clean the paint off his hands and, soothed by Henrietta's joy over her happy idea of not paying the painter $5, he looked forward to the next night. The first thing he did was to buy another bottle of turpentine, thereby reducing the amount saved to $3.10.

It was easy going the next night, except that he put too much turpentine in the paint, and, as it was thinner, it flowed more freely to various parts of the room. The color was superb, though. It just matched the other shelves. Henrietta was delighted, although somewhat skeptical about the overflow on the floor and the vagrant daubs on the wall. "A little turpentine will fix that up after we have put on the last coat," said Mr. Husband reassuringly.

The last coat was applied the third night and the job pronounced complete, albeit there were places on the shelves where the paint looked a little lumpy. "A little sandpaper will remove those lumps," said Mr. Husband. "Then it will be hunky-dory." The sandpaper cost only 10 cents. The gloves were ruined. He rated them as having been worth about $1. So, he declared, about $1.90 was saved, anyway.

The next night, although he had blisters on his thumb and forefinger from holding the brush too tightly, and although the paint had somehow penetrated the blisters, Mr. Husband, with a bottle of turpentine and a rag, proceeded to remove the paint from the polished floor. When he got through he found he had removed not only the superfluous paint but also the wax polish and walnut stain as well. The floor looked as though it were breaking out with the yellow fever.

"That won't do," mused Henrietta

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Mr. Husband. "We'll get that painter up to look at the floor. It needs to be repolished, anyway."

The next night the painter went up. He rubbed his hand over the floor in an expert's deprecating way "Fix it all up as good as it was for $8."

"As I figure it," said Mr. Husband when the painter had done his work, "we saved $1.90 on the paint job. We paid $8 for the floor. Well, we would have been only $6.10 ahead if we had brought the painter in originally."

"Yes, but the floor looks nice, doesn't it?" observed Henrietta.

"I think you told me of some place where you can have your fingers manicured for 50 cents, didn't you, Henrietta?"

## Riviera Is Itself Again

LIFE is returning to a normal footing in the French Riviera.

The wonderful stretch of coastline which extends on the south of France from west of Marseilles to San Remo, and lies protected by barrier hills on the north and warmed by the sun on the south—a stretch more nearly a natural Garden of Eden than any other on earth—is reawakening to a life of pleasure after six years spent in the service of the war, writes a correspondent in The London Post. For six years, or rather, to be precise, for five years, there has been no Battle of Flowers at Nice. This year, however, everything possible is to be done to reinstate the town as the leading exponent of life on the Riviera. As yet the season cannot be said to have begun. Indeed, it rarely starts until some days after the New Year has been celebrated in Paris. Already, however, many details of the season have been laid down.

January 27 in the town of Nice constitutes the arrival of His Majesty King Carnival No. 43. On the Sunday following a high festival will be kept day and night with cars and processions through the streets. The first Battle of Flowers has been fixed for February 3, and from then onward fête succeeds fête almost without intermission. Racing at Nice and elsewhere will probably be somewhat less interesting than usual, because, so far as the Paris center is concerned, few horses have as yet been entered. As against this, however, there will be a large number of sporting events, including a motor car and aviation meeting, organized by the Nice Motor Club, between the end of February and March 3. Later in the season will follow yacht races and rowing matches, while there will also be held several lawn tennis competitions, including on March 14 the twenty-third international tournament. An international horse show will take place in March, and the recognized meetings include a steeplechase with the winning prize of 125,000 francs. The theater is not being neglected, and a large program, not too serious in character, has been arranged for the Opéra. At the Casino there will be representative artists from the great Paris theaters and arrangements have been made for official representations by the Comédie Française and the Odéon Théâtre.

Nice generally, like the rest of the Riviera, has for weeks past been busy repairing the inevitable dilapidations resulting from the long neglect that was due to the war. Masons are almost as busy in the various towns dotted along the coast as they are in the northern areas of France, and by now everything is in order for visitors.